



# Preventing suicide:

THE VOICE OF CHILDREN  
AND YOUNG PEOPLE

## Insights Part 1

Seeking and  
getting help



KidsHelpline is a service of **yourtown**



yourtown

Some people may find the content of these papers distressing. If you start to feel distressed while reading, or you have been thinking about suicide, please talk to someone you trust or call a helpline.

- **Kids Helpline – for ages 5-25 to talk about anything at all**  
24/7 phone counselling on 1800 55 1800 or WebChat between 8am and midnight at [kidshelpline.com.au](http://kidshelpline.com.au)
- **Lifeline – all ages, for support in a personal crisis**  
24/7 phone counselling on 13 11 14 or web chat between 7pm and 4am at [lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au)
- **Suicide Call Back Service – for 15 years and over, support when you or someone you know is feeling suicidal**  
24/7 phone counselling on 1300 659 467 or see [suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://suicidecallbackservice.org.au)

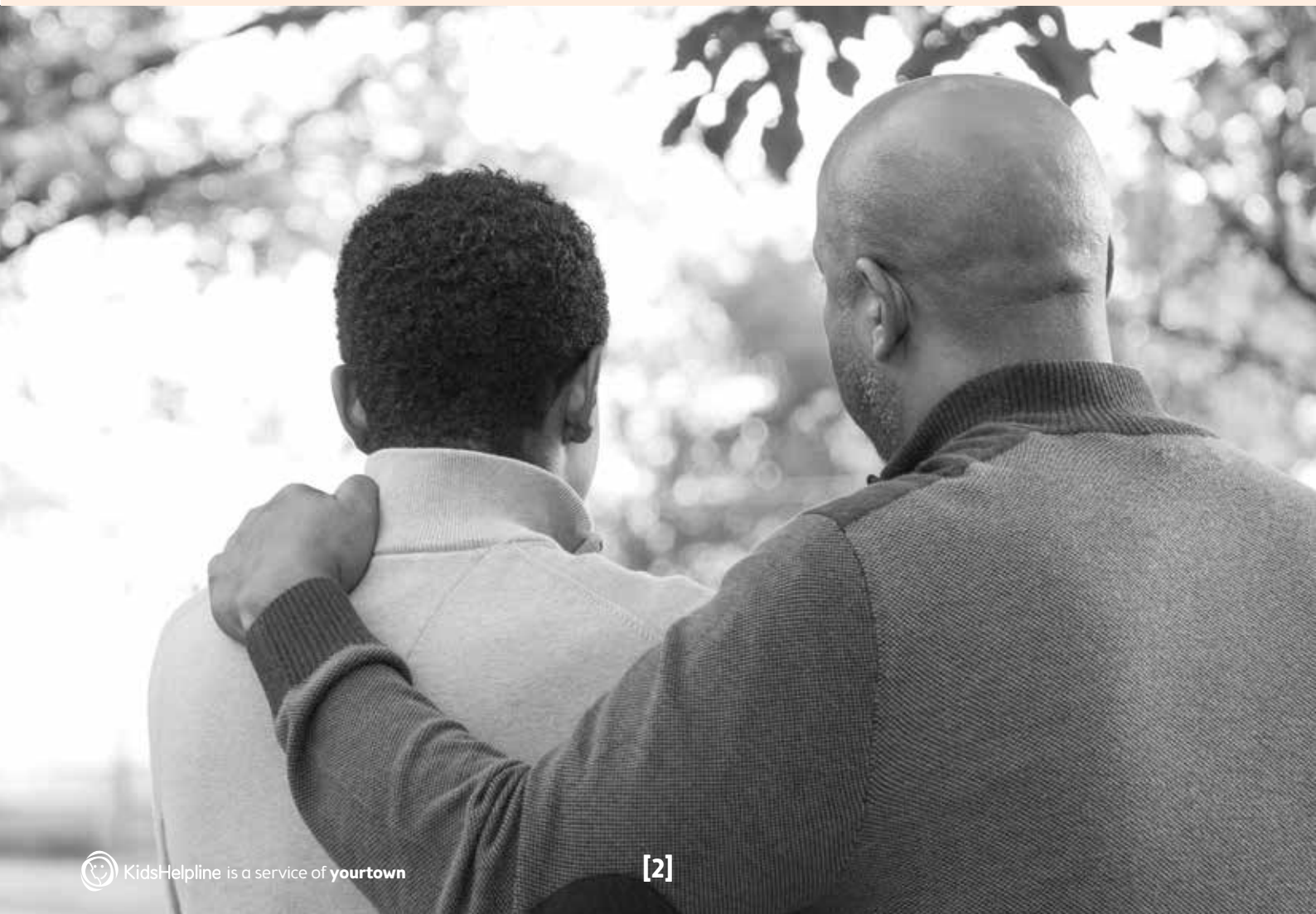
**Where to find more information:**

- **Young people:**  
[kidshelpline.com.au](http://kidshelpline.com.au), [ReachOut.com](http://ReachOut.com) and [Youthbeyondblue.com](http://Youthbeyondblue.com) have some great resources and information for young people who are going through tough times or feeling suicidal, and for young people concerned about a friend.
- **Adults:** You can read 'Suicide – The Facts' at [kidshelpline.com.au](http://kidshelpline.com.au). [beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au) provide lots of information about anxiety, depression and suicide at any age. If you are a concerned

**If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 000 for an ambulance.**

parent, they have a family guide to youth suicide prevention. [ReachOut.com](http://ReachOut.com) also has a parent site with information to help parents support their teenagers. [Conversationsmatter.com.au](http://Conversationsmatter.com.au) has tips for safe suicide discussions and other resources for both the general public and professionals.

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## BACKGROUND

**Between October 2015 and February 2016, yourtown invited children and young people who had lived experience of thinking about, planning or attempting suicide to share their experiences of seeking and getting support. The results of this consultation have been published in five papers, which are available on the yourtown website:**

- Insights Part 1: Seeking and getting help.
- Insights Part 2: Young people's experience – What helps and what doesn't.
- Insights Part 3: Messages for parents and carers.
- Insights Part 4: Implications for policy and practice.
- Background, method and description of respondents.

**This is Insights Part 1: Seeking and getting help.** These papers have been written for a general audience. We also hope to publish one or more academic papers in the future.

## ARE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE GETTING THE HELP THEY NEED FOR SUICIDE?

Overall, only 42% (n=197) of young people who responded to the survey had ever received any kind of help to deal with how they were feeling. As shown in Figure 1, young people typically didn't receive help until their symptoms were severe.

**Figure 1. Severity of suicidality and receiving help.**



**28% who were at the thinking stage had received help**



**39% of those who were at the planning stage had received help**



**47% of young people who had attempted suicide had received help**

**Thank you to all the young people who took the time to share their thoughts with us. Your insights were invaluable and are being shared with experts and decision-makers around Australia.**



Some young people were less likely to have received help than others.

- Males were slightly less likely to have received help than females, but the difference was small (37% vs 43%). This is consistent with previous research showing that males are less likely to seek either informal or formal help for a range of issues, including emotional wellbeing, mental health and physical health.
- Young people who speak a language other than English at home were less likely to have received support than others (21% vs 42%). This is also consistent with other research. Migrant families may have poorer mental health literacy

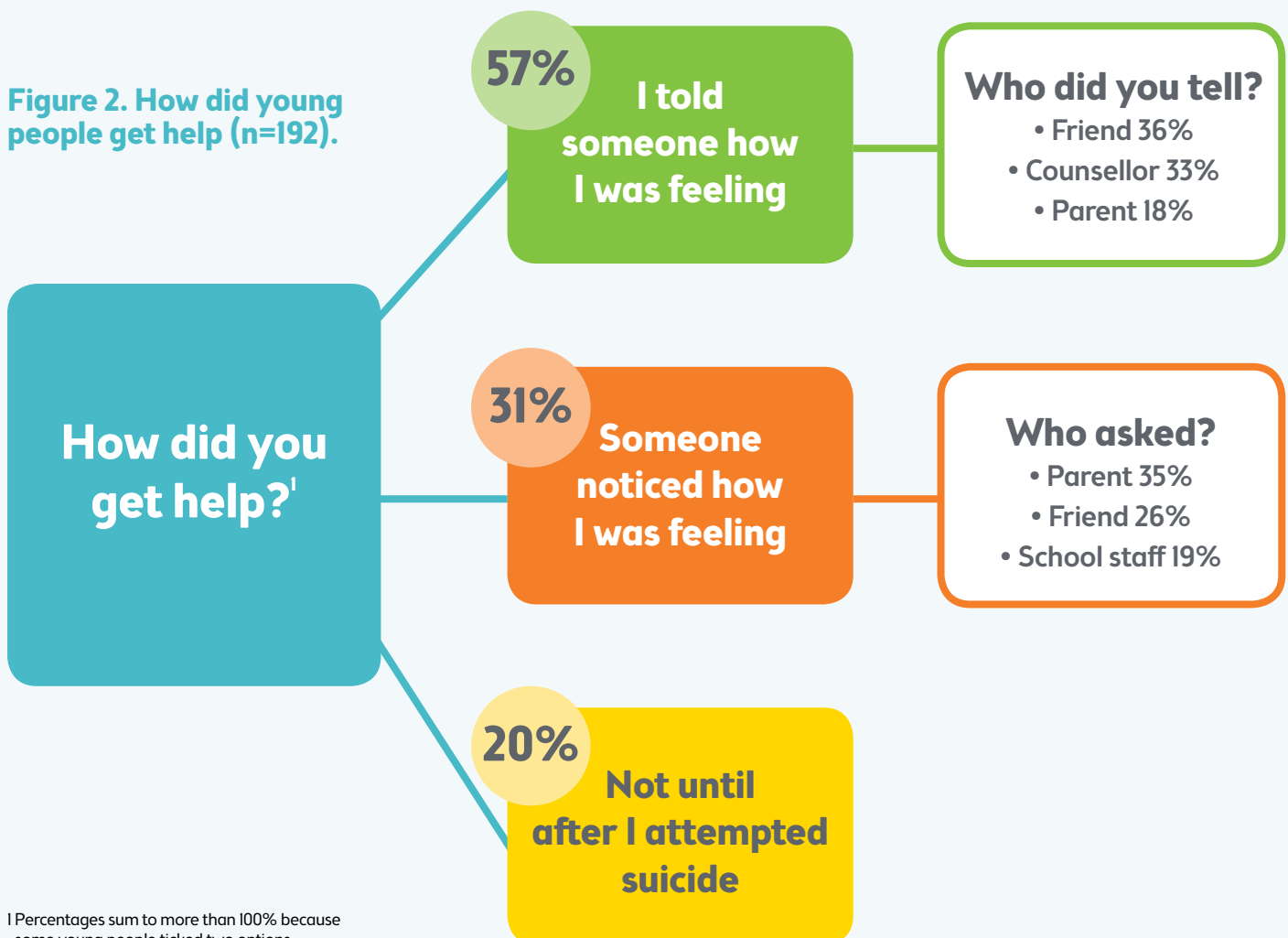
and limited awareness of available support services.

- We didn't find any differences based on where people lived, whether they were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, or their sexuality.
- Younger people were less likely to have received help than older people – 59% of those aged 17 years and above had received help, but only 29% of those aged 16 and under. This might be because older people reported more severe difficulties, or it may be that younger people find it harder to seek help or are less likely to be taken seriously when they share their feelings.

## HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE GET HELP?

As shown in Figure 2, of those who did get help, more than half told someone how they were feeling, most often a friend or counsellor. Less than a third told us that someone noticed how they were feeling and asked. Although young people were more likely to seek help from a friend than a parent, parents were more likely than friends to notice a problem and ask. Concerningly, one in five of our respondents didn't get any help until after they had attempted to end their life.

**Figure 2. How did young people get help (n=192).**



## WHY DON'T YOUNG PEOPLE GET THE HELP THEY NEED?

Many young people don't ask for help, and the people around them don't realise the seriousness of the situation. We know that distinguishing between normal child and teen ups and downs, and the kind of depression or distress that indicates a person is thinking about suicide is extremely difficult. In fact, young people told us they often hide their feelings because they're scared of how people will react or they feel ashamed and embarrassed.

### Stigma

The main thing that young people told us prevented them from actively seeking help was the stigma that surrounds mental health problems, self-harm and suicide.

"I didn't want to be judged or thought of differently. There's such a stigma about it so I just kept quiet."

"I find that if I talk to someone they won't understand or they will find me weird and never talk to me anymore."

"Stigma, stereotypes and being too proud to want to ask someone in case they see me as weak or incapable of fixing things myself."

Young people often used the words 'fear', 'afraid' and 'scared' when telling us what made it hard to seek help. This was sometimes to do with stigma and a fear of 'being judged', but was often a fear that people wouldn't believe them and wouldn't do anything to help.

"Being scared that the way I was feeling would be brushed off or called ridiculous or telling someone and them not doing anything to help."

"Scared of what they would say, embarrassed, felt like no one could help."

"No one understands what I'm going through. When I tried to tell someone close to me they thought it was a joke. They didn't take me seriously and didn't help me."

"Just listen and don't judge. When someone says they have an illness, don't respond with 'Are you sure?', 'You don't look like it' or 'Maybe it's just a mood thing' as it can make it worse."

Young people often hide their feelings because they're embarrassed, ashamed and scared of being judged or ignored.

## THE MYTH OF ATTENTION SEEKING

Many young people told us they didn't talk to anyone because they feared being labelled an attention seeker.

**"I feel so weak. Everyone will think that I'm using it for attention."**

**"I didn't want to look like I was just saying that I am depressed for attention."**

**"Every time I think of telling someone, I immediately think they will joke about it and say I'm lying and an attention seeker."**

They also described experiences that showed these fears were sometimes justified. Young people's experiences indicated that a range of people, including friends, family and medical professionals, believe the myth that self-harming or talking about depression or suicide is a form of attention seeking that need not be taken seriously.

**"My parents assume I'm okay and I'm just trying to get attention and they think I'm trying to be 'that person' when I really honestly need help."**

**"(What else would have helped?) Having a family that was supportive and listened to me instead of telling me I'm attention seeking or lying."**

**"For families – your child/loved one is not attention seeking, listen to what is going on for them and ask what you can do to support/help them."**

**"When I went to my so called best friend for help she made me feel so much worse. All she said was that I was being an attention seeker and I need to grow up and deal with my problems."**

**"[a friend] would often and still does claim that self-harm is for attention-seekers on Tumblr, and that it's not really a thing."**


Responses to our survey were consistent with what we already know. Talking about death or suicide, about feeling hopeless, or about having no reason to live are warning signs that a person is at risk. Asking for help requires courage – people often don't ask until they're desperate.

**"If someone comes to you don't laugh at them, help them because it takes a lot of courage to ask for help especially in today's society."**

**"To family members: If a child tells you they are suicidal, know that it takes great courage to do so, and that they are desperate for help."**

**"If someone has the guts to tell you about how they're feeling, don't take it lightly! It takes a lot of guts to speak about stuff like [suicide]."**

People who disclose that they are thinking about suicide are calling out for help – giving them the attention they need may save their life.



# Suicidal young people are not attention seekers. In fact, they often don't seek help because they feel worthless and undeserving.

## Feeling worthless and being a burden on others

In contrast to the idea that young people are 'attention seekers', previous research has shown that suicidal people often don't seek help because they feel worthless and undeserving. A number of responses to the question, 'What made it hard or stopped you from talking to someone or getting help?' reflected these beliefs.

"I felt that I was not worth being helped."

"No one likes me and I feel like I am no longer needed to the world."

"Didn't think anyone could be bothered with me and that they had more important things to worry about."

"I see many other people with problems that seem far greater than my own, so I just stay silent and deal with it myself. When/if I talk about my problems I feel like a burden or I am annoying people."

Young people also put the needs of others ahead of their own and didn't want to worry people.

"I'm extremely close with my mum and tell her everything but after seeing her cry when she saw my cuts 4 years ago I've kept almost every aspect of my mental health to myself. I don't want people to worry about me."

"My brother has exams at the moment so I don't want to tell anyone in case he finds out and gets distracted from his studies."

"I had a lot building up, but everyone thought I was okay. I had a lot of pressure to be that 'perfect child'. I was getting good grades ... and didn't want to let my family down."

"It's hard to tell the people who care about you that you just can't stand being alive anymore ... even though I know [person] struggled with depression in the past, I still can't bring myself to tell her that I am now. I don't want to hurt her. I don't want to be a burden."

Even when it comes to seeking help, young people may blame themselves and feel guilty if they are unable to find the courage to speak up.

"I sat on the couch, told him I needed to talk about some stuff. Took me probably twenty minutes to say that I "might" have "some problems" with "maybe" depression. Maybe. In my head I was yelling at the top of my lungs, screaming and wailing for him to just understand and help me already. He didn't. How could he? He's no mind reader. We watched some TV. Joked back and forth. Then I left. I went home. I felt so guilty. I tried so hard to tell him, to really reach out properly, but I didn't. In the end, I didn't. I felt like such a coward. It wasn't his fault, after all. I was a coward. I didn't tell him much. One day I could die, and he'll be blindsided, crushed even. Because when my life depended on it I couldn't say a thing."

## WHAT HELPED YOUNG PEOPLE TO SEEK SUPPORT?

When we asked young people what helped them to open up to someone, a common theme was trust – the importance of having someone that could be trusted to be supportive and not judgmental.

“What helped me to talk to someone is to be able to trust them with how you’re feeling.”

“They are people who I trust completely and they are non-judgemental.”

“Knowing that they will listen, I can trust them, they won’t judge, and they actually genuinely want me to be better.”

“I was already engaged in counselling and I trusted the counsellor. I felt comfortable with the counsellor.”

“I told my Counsellor because I trusted her. Even though it was hard for me to talk about anything going on I knew she would understand.”

“They were 2 really good friends that I could trust to listen to me openly and love me but not tell everyone.”

Concern about how their death would affect those close to them gave some young people the courage to speak up.

“Decided to get help to see if there was a chance of getting better because I knew my suicide was going to be really hard on my boyfriend even though I thought he would be better without me.”

“I was at the point where I was seriously worried about myself and I had a visual of what my family would go through if I killed myself.”

A number of young people told us they didn’t tell anyone until they reached a point of desperation. These comments were consistent with what we already know about suicide. Many people who take their own life don’t actually want to die, but they feel unable to continue life the way it is, and death seems like the only option to escape the pain they feel.

“The first episode I had, the thing that made me talk to someone was the fear I would kill myself. I was so up and down, one second I thought it was the only option, next I thought I had the world to live for and killing myself was the stupidest idea I’ve ever thought of. I knew I had to get help before I made that mistake.”

“97% of the time I have been suicidal I haven’t actually wanted to die, I have just wanted the pain to stop.”

“I was scared with how I was feeling. I wanted to kill myself, I wanted to end my life which actually goes against the human instinct of survival. I decided to tell someone because I decided that I needed help urgently or else I could end up dying.”

“I feel so out of place and I just screw everything up. I’m terrified to die but I feel like it’s the last option I have.”

People who take their own life often don’t actually want to die – they just feel unable to continue life the way it is, and death seems like the only escape from their pain.





## CONSEQUENCES OF NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES SEEKING HELP

Young people told us that it takes a great deal of courage to seek help for mental health problems and suicidality. Hence, a negative first experience can have

significant consequences for future help-seeking, particularly if the negative first experience is with a professional.

“My family. They didn’t believe me and thought I was lying. So when I attempted I didn’t tell anyone.”

“I was seeing a psychologist with the hope of stopping my self harming. The psychologist told me that I most likely would never stop. Hearing that I went home and of course stopped trying to stop. ... My response was to eventually attempt suicide because I believed her when she told me I wouldn’t get any better.”

“I once called [service] because I was feeling awful but didn’t know if I would do something. The attendant told me to go speak to someone else about it ... When I told her I had no one

to talk to, she proceeded to go through everyone I could talk to. With each answer I said it was impossible, but she would then become defensive about it and start saying I was just overthinking it. The whole incident made me feel worthless and that no one actually cared about my wellbeing, which worsened my bad feelings.”

“I went to a GP who would not give me a mental health care plan because I would not show her my self harming. She was rude and patronising and put me off seeking professional help for a couple of years. She implied that I was making everything up. I felt stupid and small and ashamed.”

“Before seeing the school counsellor, I had gone to the website [beyondblue.org](https://beyondblue.org) and taken a test to determine how low or high my depression was and I scored a high. The test had advised to seek help one being a general practitioner for referral to a person who is equipped to help me. I was in the stages where the thoughts of suicide were constant. I went to a medical clinic after school which was very hard because I was so afraid someone might see me and recognise me there. I asked for a doctor and the entire time a part of me was thinking that I didn’t need to talk to a doctor but another small part said don’t leave yet, maybe they can help. Once I met the doctor, told her my symptoms and what I was feeling and experiencing, all she said was to come back in a few more weeks. She did not do any psych evaluations or anything remotely helpful. I left the clinic feeling heartbroken because I was thinking that if a doctor can’t help me then who can? They are supposed to help but after leaving that office I felt like it was a sign that maybe I am not supposed to be alive. I lost faith in anyone helping me. I felt like the doctor had given me permission to kill myself.”

## WHAT CAN OTHER PEOPLE DO TO SUPPORT SOMEONE TO GET HELP?

### Young people want someone to ask if they're okay.

"If people saw through my smile and realized it was fake a lot of the time ... Sometimes I don't like telling people I'm not okay as I feel like I need to be strong for everyone around me ... often I may be trying to hint towards how I'm feeling without actually saying it as I may be too embarrassed or worried about being judged."

"If someone could've noticed. People say I'm Okay, but usually they are lying. There needs to be more awareness."

"I just want someone to ask me if I ever had suicidal thoughts, my reply will be yes. No one really knows how sad I am."

"I could have spoken to someone about how I was feeling, because I think a big part of it was having to keep this massive part of my life to myself. I think I just needed someone to properly ask me how I was."

"For family and friends I would say that just because someone is really down and tells you to go away, don't leave them alone if you are worried ... I have often told someone to go away and just leave me alone when I was suicidal, when all I really wanted was to tell them what was wrong."

"I often can't or won't ask for help if I need it. No matter how badly I need it. The most I can manage is "Hey, so, I think I might maybe have a little problem with depression, maybe." Often with some muttering, mumbling and long periods of silence in between. Even though in my head I'm screaming "help me" at the top of my lungs I can't get a word out."

### Friends can help by telling a trusted adult.

"Even if it seems unlikely that your loved one is depressed always tell an adult, teacher or professional just to be sure."

"For friends: watch out for the warning signs, ask your friend if they are considering suicide. Tell a trusted adult. Get your friend help and support."

"Don't be afraid to call an ambulance, even if they say they'll hate you for it."

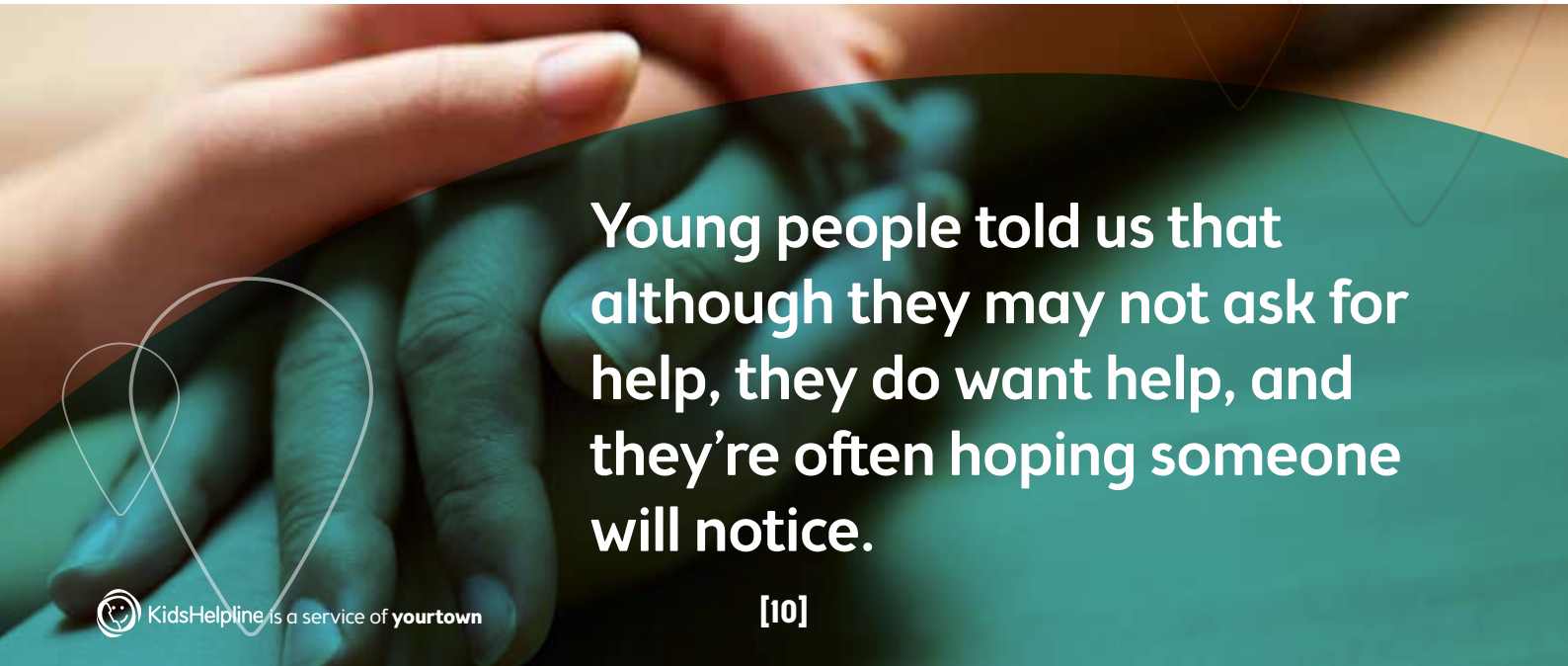
"My best friend was the one who told the wellbeing teacher who told my parents so in the long run she has helped me so so much. I wouldn't be here without her."

"It would've helped if my family or friends noticed something was wrong. When I used to cut a lot I'd come to school with bandages up my arm, it wasn't exactly subtle, not once did one of my friends ever think to tell a teacher."

### Counselling can make a difference, but young people often need encouragement and support to access professional services.

"[I needed] someone I could talk to who was qualified and didn't involve effort (I was very depressed and couldn't see the point in seeking help)."

"Offer to help them call Kids Helpline or another service and sit with them for support (if they want you to) whilst they make that call, or go with them to headspace or another face-to-face support centre."



Young people told us that although they may not ask for help, they do want help, and they're often hoping someone will notice.



# PARTICIPANTS' MESSAGES FOR OTHER YOUNG PEOPLE

"Just be brave and reach out for help and support if you need it, it doesn't make you weak, it actually makes you stronger and it is a really positive step."

"Just take it one day at a time, put yourself out there to the services available because eventually something will make you feel better."

"Speak up. Talk to someone. It's better to talk to someone before these thoughts consume you, and you ultimately do something you regret."

"Reach out for help, until you get what you need. I know it's hard, and I'm sorry this isn't easy. Keep

going and don't give up. It sucks trying to ask for help, but it will be so worth it."

"I would tell the young people to reach out to someone, don't do it alone. You might believe that no one really gets you or that you deserve to feel this way. But just reach out. Let someone in so you don't have to do it alone."

"Talk, talk, talk to someone like Kids Helpline, Lifeline, headspace, or organisations like this especially if you don't feel like you can trust family etc. Talking is the only way out of suicide and it doesn't matter if what you say sounds really dumb you will feel better saying than keeping it inside."

"Talk to someone. Anyone. Find someplace where you can be as anonymous as you'd like, or as known, but just find someone to talk to. Find someone who'll listen. Online forums can work miracles, and strangers can be your angels."

"I think get help as soon as possible is the best advice I can give... Because if you wait too long it will just get worse and worse till breaking point."

"Tell someone. Don't let the fear stop you."

